Challenging the tyranny of the five-paragraph essay: teachers and students as semiotic boundary workers in classroom and digital space

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Abstract

This article addresses several challenges faced by educators and students in English classrooms in the US–Mexico borderlands region that will resonate with educators more broadly. I present how Ms Smith, the predominately Latino students in her high school writing class and I moved beyond what Ms Smith called the "tyranny of the five-paragraph essay" used for standardised tests so that students were able to make personally and academically meaningful arguments in their writing. I examine how we collaboratively mobilised interests, motivations and diverse semiotic resources across out-of-school and in-school contexts in the process of developing multimodal and hybrid genres and texts. First, I describe how Ms Smith and I crafted hybrid, digitally mediated classroom spaces and essay assignments informed by students' identity and literacy practices within digital networks. Next, I examine how three Latina students used semiotic resources and issues circulating in the different spaces of their lives to confidently argue their perspectives within the hybrid genres we created. From this collaborative work, I suggest that thinking of students and teachers as "semiotic boundary workers" provides a useful framework for practitioners who want to enable young people to draw on their practices and digital tools and engage their expansive, networked and creative affordances in academic contexts.

Key words: new literacies, identity, media, pedagogy, multimodality, digital literacy/ies, writing

Introduction

During a decade of work with educators in urban Arizona, US–Mexico borderlands region schools, I found that teachers, regardless of seniority or pedagogical approach, often echoed the same sentiments about the constraining conditions of their practice. They felt limited by 'teaching to the test' and challenged by their school district's call to include new media in their classrooms. Teachers reported that in addition to the pressures of testing and technology, an increasingly hostile political climate for Latinos in Arizona caused emotional stress and curtailed educational opportunities for the Latino students in their classrooms.

This paper presents how teacher Ms Sandra Smith, the predominantly Latino students in her writing classroom and I addressed what we viewed as the contradictory aims of standardisation and new literacies development situated within the socio-cultural context of the US–Mexico borderlands. We joined my research aim of examining how new media and youth practices could expand students' new literacies in academic contexts with Ms Smith's objective of moving beyond what she termed "the tyranny of the five-paragraph essay" used for standardised tests in order to support students in what she articulated as 'embodying arguments' in their writing. To create space for students to confidently argue their perspectives in texts, our collaboration focused on the development of hybrid-genre essay assignments that joined the conventions, modalities, objectives and audiences characteristic of both new media and academic domains. Our objective was to support students' movement of semiotic resources across the boundaries of genres normative to in-school and out-of-school spaces and to combine students' new media repertoires, interests and concerns with academic purposes. Pseudonyms are used for all participants' names. Names seen in images and representations of students' work are also pseudonyms (names that were not removed were changed to the proper pseudonym).

After a discussion of the context and approach, I share how Ms Smith and I collaboratively designed digitally mediated classroom spaces and hybrid essay assignments. Subsequently, I present an analysis of the work of three Latina students who crafted personally and academically responsive argumentative texts within the spaces we co-created. I theorise the term *semiotic boundary workers* as a metaphor to illustrate the ways Ms Smith, the students and I mobilised interests, motivations and diverse semiotic resources across out-of-school and in-school contexts in the process of developing multimodal and hybrid texts. Throughout the discussion, I present how identity emerged as a key mediating tool to support participants' use of semiotic resources, interests and issues salient to and circulating in the different spaces of their lives as rich resources for meaning-making.

The context and approach

My partnership with Ms Smith was part of a larger study that examined how to appropriate youth practices and new media tools for new literacies learning in classrooms. Our collaboration addressed several problems of practice and gaps in the research related to the use of digital media in academic spaces. Despite research indicating the importance of digital technologies for young people, youth experiences with new media still demonstrate largely untapped potential for informing school-based learning responsive to adolescent literacy, identity and socialisation practices (Ito et al., 2008). As Lam (2009) notes, and largely holds true today, in the United States, little work on new media and learning has addressed the practices of youth from nondominant communities. In addition, racially diverse and working-class students' engagement with digital tools are often highly controlled or ineffectively integrated in classrooms (Warschauer, 2006).

Our work took place in an urban Arizona borderlands high school serving predominately Latino and low-income students primarily during academic year 2009–2010. Significantly, the research occurred during the inception of the 'Arizona firestorm' (Santa Ana, 2012) when xenophobic legislation passed targeting Latinos with deleterious consequences for Mexican-heritage students.[1] Despite lauding 21st-century skills, the district was woefully under-resourced with technology, provided little technology-related professional development and disallowed students from bringing their own digital mobile tools or accessing popular media sites such as YouTube. The political and social context compounded long-standing deficit discourses for Latinos prevalent in the borderlands region. Historically, local schools have undervalued what researchers term Latino households' funds of knowledge – the linguistic, cultural and economic resources and repertoires that have developed over time and within and across families in the borderlands region (González et al., 2005).

To address contradictions circulating in the research context, the participatory approach combined interventionist research, in the cultural–historical activity theoretical tradition of expansive learning (Engeström, 1987), with ethnographic methods for informing curricular practice (González et al., 2005; Lee, 2007) and a new literacies pedagogy stressing collaborative, critical and multimodal semiosis (Lemke, 2003; New London Group, 1996). Crafting hybrid and multimodal essays, genres and texts, as the goal of our endeavours, was envisioned as a process of growing together elements of 'youth' and 'school' activity systems comprised of particular communities, rules, subjects, objects and specific semiotic resources, or what Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 3) calls "the actions, materials and artefacts we use for communicative purposes". We aimed to support students in drawing from and combining resources and practices from across the boundaries of multiple activity systems to create strong and meaningful arguments in their texts.

Together, Ms Smith and I reflected on theory and practice, planned and negotiated the design of classroom activity through daily discussion, correspondence, co-teaching and multiple weekly meetings. To share responsibility for the format and content of the class, we co-developed the second semester of her course's syllabus and reconfigured the three essays that Ms Smith designated as the 'pillars' of the writing class. As I will elaborate in the succeeding text, Ms Smith and I incorporated students into the development of the curriculum through a variety of strategies. We promoted both social and academic participation in the classroom social network site, and we devoted class time for students to brainstorm with us how to use classroom digital platforms and to voice their reflections on course activity. For the assessment of student work, we instituted the practice of self-assessments and co-constructed rubrics with students. In order to introduce a group research essay where students were to conduct their own qualitative research, we invited several students (collectively known as 'Storywiki') to instruct the class on their methods of collaboration within a wiki created outside of school. These efforts were organised to involve all participants in joining together their interests, objectives and concerns as part of the design of research activity and classroom literacy learning and to circulate agency for decision-making in the process of hybridising practices across participants.

Developing hybrid digital spaces and essay assignments

Ms Smith was dissatisfied with the arguments her students developed in the standard five-paragraph essay. To support our work in reconfiguring the format of the research essays she was required to teach we drew from the three complementary frameworks: (1) Gutiérrez's (2008) syncretic approach with migrant youth who "locate and relocate their experiences in a personal, political, and cultural–historical context" (p. 150) to create 'syncretic texts' that draw from and extend the conventions of everyday and school-based literacies; (2) Lee's (2007) research on cultural datasets, which can be comprised of rap lyrics, music videos, specific linguistic practices or other aspects of students' funds of knowledge and are used by educators to "privilege sources of knowledge that students recognize are not valued in schools" (p. 134); and (3) students' funds of knowledge, specifically their identity and literacy practices derived from their networked participation with new media and as Latino youth in the borderlands Moll et al., 2013). Undergirding our approach to re-working the essays was a view of literacy as a social practice, texts as multimodal accomplishments and an understanding that the

social context, genre, artefacts and modalities available for semiosis shape the possibilities available for meaning-making and the kinds of identities that can be represented in texts (Blommaert, 2010; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001).

The evolution of my partnership with Ms Smith hinged upon our joint analysis of 'Storywiki', a multimodal epic that was initiated in an after school club I facilitated in her classroom with a tight-knit group of friends. The group chose to use a wiki to develop what had been an oral and image-based story into a multimodal narrative comprised of hundreds of hyperlinked pages. Data collected over time of Storywiki participation demonstrated students' work developed primarily through collaborative writing and drawing of fantasy characters based on the students' lives and utilising shared composition conventions created by the group. The students shared in interviews that they intentionally drew from diverse sources, such as popular media and digital video games, Japanese manga, cultural mythology, English literature, geography and biology to create work that would have multiple meanings for different audiences. Figure 1 depicts an example of Storywiki's intentional heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981). Storywiki participation demonstrated how the employment of different spaces and modes (e.g. oral, written and images) afforded distinctive, socially mediated and interconnected processes of meaning-making (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001).

Ms Smith voiced astonishment at the complexity and scope of Storywiki, which she stated was beyond any schoolwork she had seen. After observing in Storywiki how students' identities, peer interaction and new media technologies served to mobilise semiotic resources from multiple contexts for rich literacy practices, Ms Smith invited me to co-instruct the Spring semester of her writing course. On the basis of the literature and our Storywiki observations, we aimed to design hybrid, digitally mediated spaces to support students' argumentative writing by engaging identity as a key mediating tool and 'leading activity' or what cultural–historical theorists articulate as a primary activity driving development in a particular historical moment (Leontiev, 1981, in Cole and Engestrom, 2007). To mobilise and leverage the reciprocal relationship between identity and meaning-making within texts prevalent in new media spaces for students' academic activity, we also drew from Stetsenko and Arievitch's (2004) articulation of the self as a leading activity. Their discussion of the self as a constantly re-constructed process and instrument of social change that organises activity largely through the cultural tools available in a particular context informed our approach to incorporating a broader array of semiotic resources in the classroom.

To engage students' identities as leading activities and to allow for a greater diversity of semiotic resources in the writing course, as co-teachers, our first move was to

A) "Elves" Page text excerpts:

<u>Characteristics</u>: Elves are not selfish. **They treasure their trees and animals more than they would treasure people.** Elves are peaceful unless constantly provoked, and only resort to violence if there is no other option.

<u>Social System and Practices:</u> A monarchical society, but without any strict regulations. There are no real formalities. **The eldest of the elves (and wisest) were those with long hair.** They typically leave it down loosely with their personal choice of something natural (like a crown of leaves on their head). **The elf queen and king have the longest hair, and are regarded as the wisest elves."**

Text excerpt: The King and Queen live by the waterfall. It's a big tree that spreads with roots over the rocks.

B) "Elves" Page Images (excerpt) depicting **Elf with long hair drawn by Petra:**

Elves have dark skin. I made her clothes earthy, kinda camouflage-ish with cultural design

C) "Elves" Page Comments:

Mariela said: "HEY HEY HEY OK Maybe they know when an elf is an elder because of the hair. **In Aztec culture, the longer the hair the wiser the person is."**

Noli said at 11:59 am on Mar 2, 2010 Reply Delete Yeah I like it too. How tall are the trees? They should be HUGE **:D**

Wendi said at 4:12 pm on Mar 2, 2010 Reply Delete like the redwoods? **is it a coniferous or deciduous forest? or mixed**

Noli said at 7:54 pm on Mar 2, 2010 Reply Delete uhhh....yeah....mixed....yea**...XD**

Petra said at 9:25 pm on Mar 2, 2010 Reply Delete maybe not as big as the redwoods, or maybe... idk lol. the big tree place should be the elven city

Figure 1: Excerpts from the Storywiki 'Elves Page', Petra's personal character group, depict how students joined semiotic resources from multiple contexts (e.g. Aztec culture, biological knowledge and Japanese manga-styled drawing) and utilised multiple modalities to create their narrative. Bolded text shows the movement of semiotic resources from diverse sources in their meaning-making process within the Elves page

Figure 2: Hybrid participation in Petra's Writers' Wonderland (classroom social network) profile. Petra adds artwork, posts her essays, replies to Ms Smith and chats with friends

create a classroom social network that focused on identity and shared ownership. Data collected tracking participation in the site, named Writers' Wonderland by the class, indicated that participants posted media that revealed multiple aspects of their personal and academic identities. Figure 2 shares an example of how the site developed as a hybrid space through inviting students to participate academically and socially, providing opportunities to share semiotic resources circulating in their lives and popular media and allowing the use of students' mobile tools in class. The multimodal resources students contributed in Writers' Wonderland developed rich cultural datasets that Ms Smith and I subsequently drew from to help move students' interests into the production of academic arguments.

Ms Smith and I continued to engage identity as the primary organising concept and digital media as the key
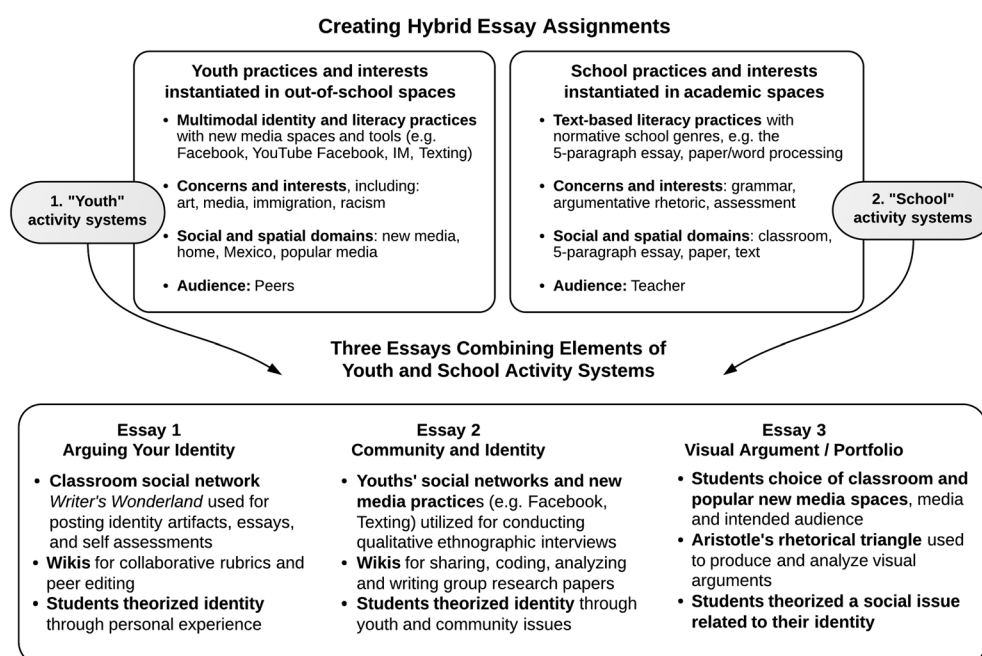

Figure 3: Creating hybrid essay assignments joining elements of 'youth' and 'school' activity systems

tool to reconfigure her course's required research essays. Figure 3 illustrates how we combined elements of school and youth activity systems to craft the three hybrid essay assignments. Essay one, "Arguing your identity", was posted on Writers' Wonderland and developed to leverage students' experience with self-representation in social networks with the need to instruct students on academic persuasion. Essay two, 'The community essay', extended participants' theorisation of identity into the genre of social science research. Students collaboratively formed research questions that connected issues to identity and used their networks and social media to conduct interviews. Informed by Storywiki students' creative process, they then co-analysed their data and co-wrote their research paper within a wiki. For essay three, 'The visual argument', students were asked to theorise a social issue related to their identity through creating a multimodal response to a visual argument and a written precis using elements of Aristotle's rhetorical triangle. To move beyond the teacher as the final authority for students' work, and gain insight on students' perspectives, each essay required a self-assessment, and the final essay and portfolio invited students to choose the genre of their choice to reach their preferred audience.

Each essay worked to hybridise academic and new media genres. In this process, Ms Smith's teaching required semiotic boundary work – movement across the boundaries of multiple activity systems that allowed for the development of new perspectives on meaning-making processes in out-of-school spaces that she appropriated for academic purposes linked to her identity as a teacher. The following section delves into an analysis of the semiotic boundary work of three Latina students as these youth created strong, personally and academically responsive argumentative texts within the hybrid spaces of the reconfigured essay assignments.

Crafting hybrid texts

This section presents how students Delcia, Petra and Claricia, Latina adolescents in their final year of high school, marshalled their identities as leading activities for arguing their perspective in texts. For each student, I detail how their identities, taken up as meaning-making processes in multimodal texts, catalysed the movement of semiotic resources across the boundaries of youth and school activity systems, multiple genres and the three classroom essays, and supported Petra, Delcia and Claricia in embodying strong arguments in their academic work. Congruent with an emphasis on the social and multimodal construction of meaning-making, the data I analysed drew from an array of sources: daily classroom media-taping, interviews, field notes, social network and wiki participation, self-assessments and multimodal artefacts. To examine these students' hybrid textual production, I coded for the three interrelated semiotic processes elaborated in Table 1: entextualisation, intertextuality and recontextualisation. As illustrated earlier in Table 1, students' participation in classroom spaces and essays involved the movement of semiotic resources across multiple contexts and modalities. Entextualisation made new semiotic resources available for teachers and students to take up as tools for meaning-making in texts. A growing intertextual awareness and practice on the part of students and teachers supported the movement of semiotic resources across contexts for advancing particular perspectives. Once semiotic means were made mobile and connected, teachers and students recontextualised these resources for new meanings and new purposes. The analysis of students' work in the succeeding text examines how these three interrelated semiotic processes developed through the hybrid essays and digital spaces and supported students in crafting personally meaningful arguments in their texts.

Table 1: Three interrelated semiotic processes in students' texts

Interrelated semiotic processes	*Examples from the data*
Entextualisation The process of turning actions or discourses into mobile semiotic mediational means (Jones, 2009).	Writers' Wonderland and the hybrid essays formed a space for students to share concerns and interests (e.g. racism and creativity) and practices from out-of-school spaces in the formation of multimodal cultural datasets. Storywiki students turned their oral and image-based story into a multimodal wiki.
Intertextuality The act of linking texts to other texts across particular perspectives and genres (Bakhtin, 1981; Bazerman, 2004; Fairclough, 1992).	Students connected, developed and argued their perspective on themes related to their identities (e.g. racism and creativity) across the three essays, Writers' Wonderland and through the use of popular media genres, multiple modalities and discourses.
Recontextualisation The transfer and re-imagining of semiotic resources from one domain into another context for new purposes (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009).	Students repurposed their interests, their identity and literacy practices, and new media genres for academic text-making and analysis. For example, Claricia used a metroflog social network profile to construct her final essay and portfolio.

Petra: letting the artist lead

In their final portfolio and wiki Petra and her group wrote:

> *"Intro to our portfolio:*
> *CREATIVITY*
> *ANY KIND OF WRITING CAN BE CREATIVE!*
> *NO LIMITS! NO 5 PARAGRAPH ESSAYS!"*

Throughout her participation in the writing course, Petra drew on her strong voice in visual modalities that she shared and developed in popular media and peer-group digital spaces (e.g. deviantART and Storywiki) and recontextualised for crafting academic arguments in multiple modalities. Her work in the course began with an analysis in essay one (the 'identity essay') of how her extreme shyness affected her creativity, moved to interviewing other artists about links between personality and creativity for essay two and culminated in a video for essay three depicting how she expressed herself "through the process of art, not the outcome" in order to argue this perspective for "People who think they can't draw, so they refuse to try" (essay three precis).

Table 2 and Figure 4 show how intertextual linkages between texts depicting Petra's 'shy' identity associated with her childhood and her school persona, and her 'leader' identity, which she performed among her peer group and in Storywiki developed in Writers' Wonderland and across the three essays. In essay one, Petra re-mixed the imagery of a 'sparkling star' in winter representing her lonely childhood from a digital story she created into the opening line of her identity essay, where she discussed her childhood as the inception of both her extreme shyness and artistic life. Petra's classroom work also drew from her identity as a leader for the development of Storywiki, where she was the main visual artist. Her character in Storywiki first appeared as an image in her art sharing profile, moved to Storywiki and then became her avatar for Writers' Wonderland. Petra continued the migration of artefacts and identities from personal to academic spaces over the semester. When we introduced essay two to the class, Petra led a presentation and discussion on how the group developed Storywiki. Although she described herself in essay one as extremely quiet in school, over the semester, supported through the circulation of her multimodal work, she developed a new, visible and vocal identity within Writers' Wonderland and the writing class.

With essay three, Petra continued to develop her role as a leader in new spaces. She argued her perspective against preconceived ideas about creativity and restrictions on who is able to make art by focusing on the process and enjoyment of creating art and not the end product. Petra created a video with screen capture to draw and erase a series of doodles to a song that culminated in the final frame showing the words 'freedom of expression' (see Figure 5). In her self-assessment, Petra explained:

> *"The explicit message in my video is how I express myself doesn't necessarily come out perfect. The implicit message would be that having fun is the point of expression".*

Table 2: Re-mixing and intertextuality across genres and modes

Digital story posted in Writers' Wonderland	**Identity essay** posted in Writers' Wonderland
Title: 'Sparkling Star' Opening (spoken) line: "I looked up at the giant sparking star, shining on top of the plaza's enormous Christmas Tree."	Title: 'Too Timid For Words' Opening (written) lines of essay: "A single white snowflake falls from the glistening white pines … It sparkled in the sunlight like tiny crystals spread out beneath my feet."

Petra's art sharing site profile on JazzyArt

Lorema lives with her mother in the Elven city.

Storywiki character Lorema on storywiki

Lorema as Petra's avatar and her artwork portfolio on the class ning
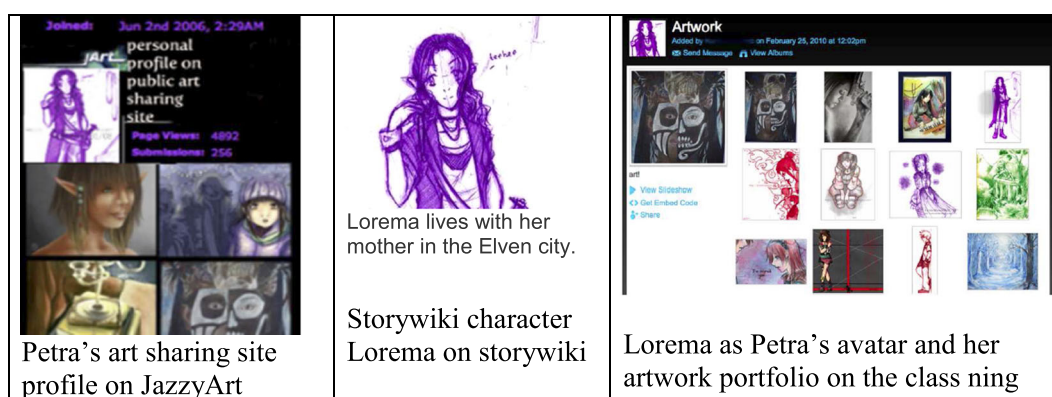
Figure 4: Petra repurposed imagery from her public art sharing profile to Storywiki and Writers' Wonderland (the classroom social network). The image of Lorema, her character in Storywiki, travelled from JazzyArt (pseudonym) in 2006 to Storywiki and Writers' Wonderland in 2009–2010

Figure 5: Frames from Petra's 'Freedom of Expression' video (essay three) simulating the playful creation and erasure of the images

Petra expressed in her precis that her appeal to the audience centred on the use of childish doodles that she used to index a more carefree time in the lives of her viewers. For this essay, on the basis of her own process and values, Petra developed a public message beyond the audience of her peers or classmates to appeal to a broad audience to recognise the value of freedom of expression. Through the three essays, Petra's exploration of her shyness and its relationship to her creativity provided a rich resource for her essays and initiated the movement of spoken and visual modalities from outside of school into the construction of her academic texts. Her final essay shows how her identity as a shy student took a back seat to her strong voice as an artist when she recontextualised her art-making from what had been a predominately private practice into the creation of a public message.

Delcia's dream

Similar to Petra, Delcia's trajectory through the course also charts her movement from voicing internal struggles to leveraging her identity as a platform from which to argue a personally meaningful message to a broad audience. Delcia began the semester by enxtextualising her frustrations about the racism affecting young Latinos through posting on Writers' Wonderland a video that appropriated a famous Latino song for a racist ballad, 'Illegal Aliens in My Yard' (Figure 6). Her subsequent work continued this theme and argued from the perspective of a young, first-generation Latina the meaning of her identity in a context where her immigration status precluded her dream of attending a 4-year university.

Akin to how Petra explored her timidity as a product of the historical circumstances of her life, in the first essay, 'Arguing your identity', Delcia addressed internalised racism:

"As I sat down to write this essay I realized something though … I realized that every time I applied for a scholarship or college and circled or colored that I'm Hispanic, in my mind I always pictured a community that has been in silent war for decades; pictures of people working hard for the lowest minimum wage or people being deported or people living in fear. And I thought 'Oh GOSH why am I thinking this stuff' but it's not that we have racist minds or that we have forgotten what our culture is all about …".

In turning an analytical gaze onto herself as she moved the imagined images and voices of her community into text, Delcia unearthed, entextualised and recontextualised societal discourses insidiously entering her subjectivity. Her statement in her self-assessment,
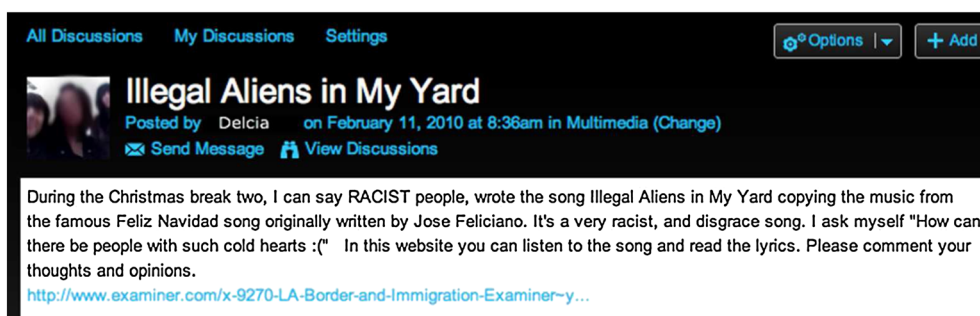

Figure 6: Delcia's forum post in Writers' Wonderland (classroom social network) expressing outrage at a famous Latino song 'Feliz Navidad (Merry Christmas)' repurposed to denigrate Latinos

"As I wrote, I learned, and as I learned I found out new things about my personality and my culture, and it alerted me more about the problems we are currently having in this state", demonstrated a growing sense of the structural causes of her position.

In essays two and three, Delcia engaged her identity as a young Latina to transform the context of her development through creating texts based on her concerns. She voiced the difficulties of being a Latina due to racism, the heterogeneous experiences of young Latinos and the dream of higher education for Latino students (Figures 7 and 8). For essay three, in order to reach her desired audience of Latino high school students and scholarship sponsors, Delcia created and posted on YouTube a video entitled 'I have a Hispanic Dream 2010'. She shared in her self-assessment:

> "The use of a commercial was very efficient for me because many times I learn by visuals and also by listening to things, like testimonies. I decided to write on this because it relates to me personally".

To argue her 'dream' of university scholarships for Latinos, Delcia employed multiple intertextual relationships between the discourse of the Civil Rights era, the 'Dreamer' movement of undocumented youth, and her own identity. She used an overlay of Martin Luther King's famous speech with repetitive images of youth in graduation gowns and American flags, indexing Latinos as American students. Delcia specifically connected to her own identity by using an image of a young Latina girl studying a book with an American flag flying above her head. By using a picture showing many hands creating a circle and together spelling DREAM ACT, Delcia also recontextualised a common youth photographic genre and demonstrated the deep embodiment of 'the dream' of education for Latino youth.

In her final portfolio self-assessment, Delcia shared that she had a very hard time that year because she "had to make very hard decisions … they all have to do with me being Hispanic". She stated that she had never talked about her culture or explored her roots, but in our class, she "found a freedom to write about myself, a freedom that I've never had". In the three essays and classroom digital spaces, Delcia took new actions within texts through positioning her identity as a platform for building personally meaningful arguments for public audiences related to important political issues affecting her community.

Claricia: challenging static notions of identity

Claricia, a second-generation Latina student, worked with Delcia in the same research group and addressed many similar themes of Latino identity. In Writers' Wonderland and the three essays, Claricia recontextualised multimodal semiotic resources from United States and Mexican popular media to explore contradictory stances towards Latinos and normative expectations of gender performances for Latinas. In essay one, Claricia began

Figure 7: Excerpt from Delia's Metrostudents' research group wiki page for essay two depicting her group's main research question and an interviewee's response

Figure 8: Image excerpts (~2 s each) from Delcia's 'I Have A Hispanic Dream 2010' video (essay three). Clockwise from the upper left depicts images from start to end
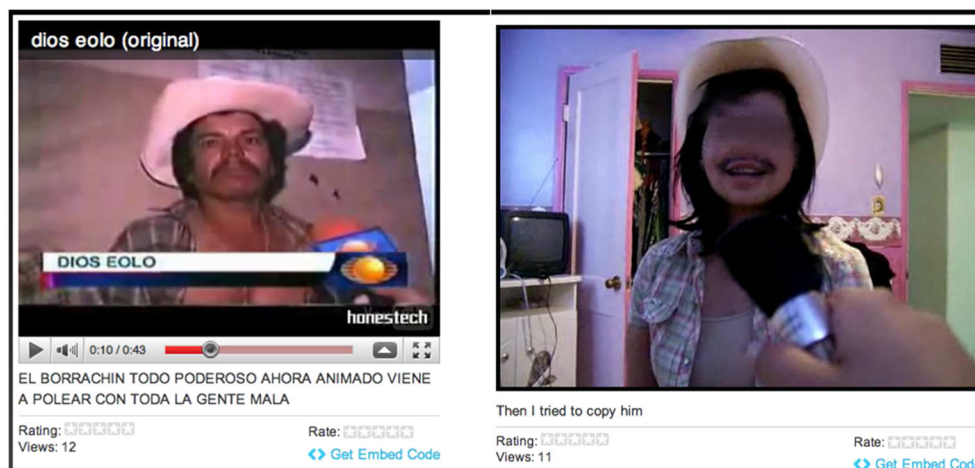
Figure 9: Claricia recontextualises a viral video in the Mexican 'borrachín' (drunkard) genre to present an experimental performance of identity in Writers' Wonderland (classroom social network) highlighting contradictions in gender norms. She wears a large fake black moustache, mimicking Dios Eolo

by examining multiple social dimensions of identity. She described how she hears her grandmother's voice telling her to "act like a *Senorita* (lady)", how her moods affected her personality and her belief that life as a girl in her culture was more difficult. Ultimately, she rejected static notions of identity and argued for a concept much like Stetsenko and Arievitch's (2004) discussion of the self as an ongoing process of becoming. She wrote in her identity essay:

> *"Identity is not only what we have in our birth certificate not only what the eye catches, it's also not only our personality because it changes with time and events. Identity is every single characteristic that make a person who he or she is, so if a person asked me what was my identity, every time I tried to answer, my answer would always be incomplete".*

Claricia's exploration of the unfinished nature of identity took a multimodal turn as she posted an experimental performance of gender on Writers' Wonderland quite unlike her reserved classroom demeanour. Figure 9 shows how Claricia recontextualised the popular media image of a Mexican *borrachín* (drunkard) to playfully challenge the gender norms she discussed in her identity essay. Her copycat video shows Claricia in her distinctly pink bedroom, dressed in drag with a cowboy hat and thick moustache, taking on the role of an infamous *borrachín*. By using the viral video format, she also drew on this genre's semiotic potential for creating notoriety, though she stated in an interview that she would not have felt comfortable sharing the video outside of the interstitial space of the classroom social network.

For essay two, Claricia was a member of the research group Metrostudents, whose named indexed their position as Spanish-speaking Latino youth by affiliating them with the Spanish language dominant social network site metroflog. In response to the political climate, the group explored the ways in which a country can change one's identity through interviewing members of their extended social and digital networks. Continuing to build off her interests and networks and to take risks in presenting new public representations of her identity, for essay three and her final portfolio, Claricia chose to use a public profile on metroflog to examine her work on Latino youth identity and to spread the word to her peers about "high school classes that are different" (Figure 10).

Demonstrating the importance of providing space for informal sharing of diverse, multimodal forms of meaning-making, Claricia began her final essay and portfolio by asking questions and posting videos she was unsure about as valid sources for her work on Writers' Wonderland. Subsequently, in her metroflog profile, Claricia juxtaposed videos of politicians, celebrities, faux and real news and home footage of her ancestral hometown in Mexico in order to explore contradictory perspectives on Latinos (see Figure 11). She questioned Obama's commitment to Latinos through coupling a video of Obama dancing with Latina superstar Thalia that indexed his position as a 'friend' of Latinos with a Saturday Night Live news skit decrying fascism in Arizona. Claricia combined these videos with her writing, essays, self-assessments and comments from friends with imagery celebrating the achievements of Latinos that indexed her own evolving identity, location and political stance. Claricia's work across the essays presented a powerful theorisation of identity as processual, and her use of media supported a critical eye towards normative gender roles and political hypocrisy. Her use of a metroflog profile for her final essay recontextualised a popular new media genre in a manner that expanded both academic and everyday youth practices.

Envisioning students and teachers as semiotic boundary workers

Throughout the research, turning to identity as a leading activity anchored teachers' and students' inquiries and
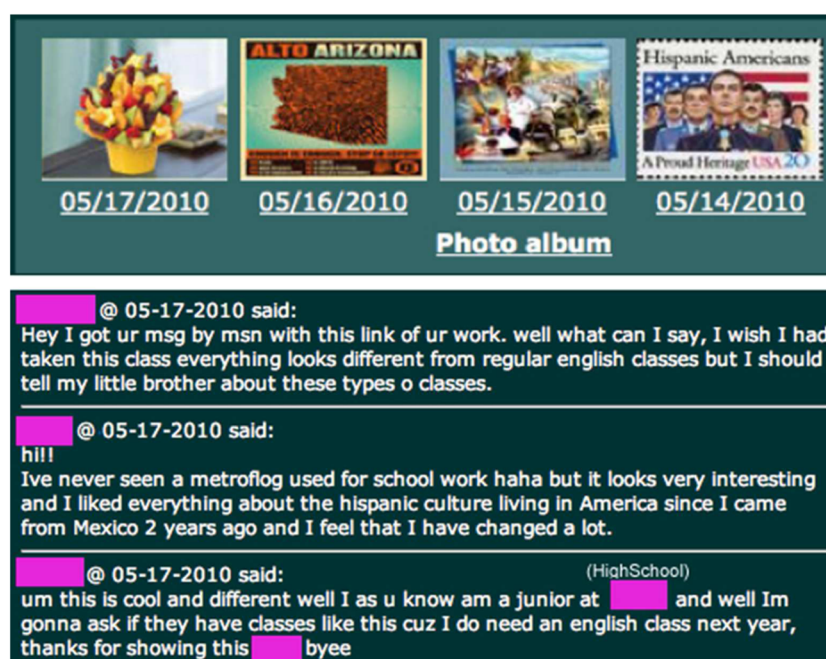
Figure 10: Excerpts from the metroflog profile Claricia created for essay three and the final writing course portfolio. Top: a 'pico de gallo' fruit cup, an Alto Arizona image, and images of Hispanic Americans indexing her location in the US southwest, her community identification and her political stance. Bottom: comments by her peers, her target audience, with whom she shared her metroflog profile to spread the word about 'classes that are different' (final portfolio)
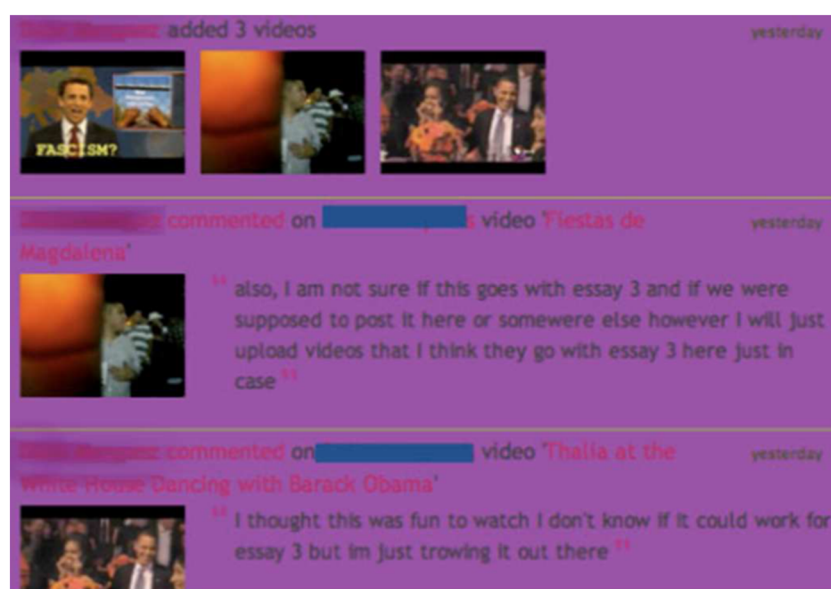

Figure 11: Claricia explored and juxtaposed videos highlighting contradictory stances towards Latinos in the United States to get feedback for her essay three ideas in Writers' Wonderland. The videos are from left, (1) Saturday Night Live sketch about fascism in Arizona, (2) Fiestas de Magdalena, Sonora, Mexico and (3) Obama dancing with Latina superstar Thalia

supported the movement of semiotic resources across the boundaries of multiple systems of activity. Claricia, Petra and Delcia performed as semiotic boundary workers through leading with their identities to travel across semiotic space and develop personal practices and nascent ideas into strong arguments representing their beliefs, expressing pride in their histories and communities and advocating for opportunities for self-expression and education (see Table 3). Each student moved from reflecting inward to creating a public text arguing a perspective for a broad audience, where they leveraged their identities, interests, practices and multiple modalities to present arguments that worked to "purposely transform the world at the very core of the self" (Stetsenko and Arievitch, 2004, p. 494). Ms Smith and my own boundary work in crafting the three essay assignments across new media and academic genres and practices provided the space for students to take risks in embodying arguments in their texts. Together with the students, we formed reciprocal relationships

Table 3: The movement of identities and interests in students' work

	Essay 1	Writers' Wonderland	Essay 2	Essay 3
Petra	Explored the relationship of her shyness to her artistic life	(*Images*) Posted art from public art sharing profile and Storywiki	What is the relationship between identity and creativity?	(*Video*) 'Freedom of Expression'. Argument: to convince those who think they cannot draw to enjoy the process of art-making
Delcia	Explored internalised racism	(*Video and forum post*) Shared and denounced racist media	How does a country affect your identity?	(*YouTube video*) 'I have a Hispanic Dream 2010' Public Service Announcement genre. Argument: Argued for scholarships for Latinos
Claricia	Explored identity as a process; gendered aspects of identity	(*Video*) Presented an experimental performance of gender identity	How does a country affect your identity?	(*Metroflog profile*) Videos juxtaposed to represent the hypocrisy of the US federal government. Argument: Argued for recognition of contradictory stances on Latinos in political and popular discourse, and for 'classes that are different'

among youth and school activity systems that stretched learning and across false dichotomies of home/school, formal/informal learning and virtual/physical spaces, and created new and expansive social situations for enacting identities and literacies in texts.

Our collaborative work offers an approach for engaging youth practices and digital tools for reconfiguring the normative genres (e.g. five-paragraph essay) of the writing classroom. This approach has much to offer educators who aim for their students to articulate strong perspectives and arguments in texts, who must address academic standards for argumentative writing in their teaching and who are interested in appropriating the affordances of new media tools. After observing and inviting youth participation in new media environments, we designed the digital spaces and essay assignments to connect the different spaces of students' lives; in this way, the semiotic resources circulating in those spaces could be leveraged for growing together everyday and academic ways of meaning-making. In these spaces, teachers and students performed as semiotic boundary workers who moved semiotic resources across youth and school activity systems in the creation of hybrid genres and texts. This work was situated at the boundaries of multiple discursive domains, creating what Lotman (2005, p. 212) denotes as "areas of accelerated semiotic processes", where through contact, hybrid genres and texts emerge more rapidly and generatively. Interstitial and hybrid spaces created at the borders of activity systems involve complex processes that can be difficult to navigate. Conceptualising students and teachers as semiotic boundary workers offers a framework for appropriating youth practices and digital tools that engage their expansive, networked and creative affordances for connecting and extending everyday practices and academic learning.

Note

1. Senate Bill 1070 when passed in spring of 2010 allowed and encouraged local police to perform what critics called 'racial profiling' in order to stop those who appeared Latino and ask for documentation of citizenship. Senate Bill 2881 moved to outlaw ethnic studies and specifically one influential Mexican American Studies programme in the Arizona public schools.

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